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## **TESTT Space: Groundwork and Experiment in a Complex Arts Organisation** **Dr Martyn Hudson (Northumbria University), Dr Hazel Donkin (Durham University)**

### **Abstract**

This paper documents and describes an omni-disciplinary ethnography of a complex arts and cultural regeneration organisation in Durham (TESTT Space). The organisation and its art spaces is a hybrid combination tool explicitly designed to test and experiment with ideas, social forms, human interactions, and arts practice. Its ground or practice is a repurposed 'meanwhile' space in a city centre embedded in a unique cultural landscape of local communities, a University and a World Heritage Site. The research attempted to understand its groundwork, its interactions and its civic mission and aspirations in a time of radical change and rupture.

We assumed an ethnographic approach, working with and within this organisation for a year, thinking of the research as embedded, intimate research and committed to social change. It was a work of co-production – working with studio-holders, curators, artists and facilitators using a range of triangulated qualitative research methods. These included structured interviews, auto-ethnography, ethnography of spaces, arts-led research, art as research and research as art.

TESTT Space has allowed both the retention of artists in the city and the propulsion of artists into the world. It has offered different ways of engaging in the complex lives of artists and curators and allowing them to test aesthetics and try out new social models. It has thought up its own network and as a thinking practice has developed its own politics, civics and imagined a set of new futures.

The extended description and documentation that the paper offers illustrates not just the power of experimental, complex and hybrid arts organisations, but also that the kinds of omni-disciplinary methods of messy ethnography that we use have wide applicability in understanding arts and its markets in times of rupture.

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**Keywords : Experiment, Ethnography, Multi-Disciplinary, Ecology, Experience,  
'Meanwhile' Spaces**

## **Introduction**

This paper documents and describes an omni-disciplinary ethnography of a complex arts and cultural regeneration organisation, TESTT Space in Durham City. The organisation and its art spaces of galleries and studios is a hybrid combination tool explicitly designed to test and experiment with ideas, social forms, human interactions, and arts practice. Its ground or practice is a repurposed 'meanwhile' space in a city centre embedded in a unique cultural landscape of local communities, a World Heritage Site and a University. The research ethnography worked with and within this organisation for a year and attempted to understand its groundwork, its interactions and its civic mission and aspirations in a time of radical change and rupture.

## **Introducing Empty Shop CIC, TESTT and TESTT Space**

Empty Shop CIC is a non-profit arts organisation based in Durham in the North East of England. It was founded in 2008 by two individuals, Carlo Viglianisi, an artist and photographer and Nick Malyan, a project manager, who choose to operate on an unsubsidised and independent basis. Initially focused on working with artists of all levels and backgrounds to produce, exhibit and promote their work, Empty Shop quickly diversified into a platform not just for the visual arts but for contemporary music, theatre, dance and culture in the broadest sense. Empty Shop was a response to the dearth of contemporary culture in Durham and over the past 10 years they have transformed over 45 spaces, hosted over a 1000 events, worked with over 3000 artists and hosted 170,000 visitors (<https://emptyshop.org/>). What initially was conceived as a short-term DIY pop-up has become firmly established in the cultural landscape of Durham. Collaboration is the key driving force of Empty Shop who act as facilitators, passing on skills that enable creative individuals and groups who have something new to contribute to realise projects. This desire to galvanise artists and create new networks of practitioners is understood as a way to promote contemporary work in a small city where there appears to be a schism between the traditional and the contemporary.

In 2016 the founders of Empty Shop began Phase 1 of an 18-month long research and development programme. The programme was named TESTT – The Empty Shop Think Tank. Incorporating artists, producers, promoters and leaders from the North East art sector TESTT explores the potential of Empty Shop as an organisation, Durham’s cultural ecology and the relationship between the two. This first phase consisted of discussions, go-and-see visits, being mentored, hosting focus groups, exploring associate delivery models and partnership working. Halfway through this phase a dead space in the city centre that Empty Shop had been interested in for some years became available, and TESTT Space, a new visual arts hub, was established at the end of February 2017. Phase 1 of TESTT was supported by Arts Council England, Durham University, Durham County Council, Annabel Turpin (Chief Executive, ARC, Stockton Arts Centre), Claire Malcolm (Chief Executive, New Writing North), Mark Robinson (Director, Thinking Practice) and Sarah Munro (Director, Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art). Phase 2 followed and involved a programme of capacity building and business development that is enabling Empty Shop to deliver on the learning and opportunities that have emerged from TESTT Phase 1. As well as TESTT Space, Empty Shop are currently involved in two major projects. As part of the Tees Valley Great Places programme they were invited to undertake a residency on Church Street in Hartlepool where they have initiated activities and created new platforms and opportunities to work with creative practitioners and businesses (<https://emptyshop.org/project/hartlepool/>). In partnership with jazz promoter AT THE ROOT, Empty Shop organise the annual Durham City Jazz Festival, established in 2017.

TESTT Space is the focus of this study. It is located directly above Durham bus station in a disused job centre in a large office block earmarked for redevelopment, along with the bus station, by the local authority. It currently provides a site for experimentation, studios to rent at affordable prices and resources for a community of more than 20 professional artists, communal work and social space for members, dark room facilities and an occasional exhibitions and events programme. Overheads are covered by the studio rents paid by artists.

TESTT Space as a space for experimentation has undergone and trialled a number of methodologies and ways of working. TESTT Space has previously featured a student art studio for Durham University students (in partnership with and funded by Durham

University), 3 gallery spaces, a 12-month programme of guest-curated exhibitions, residency space for University of the Arts, London students and graduates and a black box space for performance, events and screenings. Redevelopment is now looming and the building will be demolished in early 2020, galvanising Empty Shop to diverge once again.

### **Understanding complex organisations**

The research wanted to understand the foundations or the *groundwork* of the experimental organisation and specifically in a time of rupture and transformational change in the interior ecology of the organisation, and to its exterior in the landscape beyond. If we can think of an organisation as having a metabolism or nature we wanted to reflect on that metabolic ground or ecology. This entity was alive and we wanted to understand what it was and what it wanted in terms of mission, social impact and internal change. It had a certain number of social objectives that it had set itself and not least the compulsion to experiment and find new experimental spaces. The Empty Shop organisation often talked about itself as navigating and in so far as we use those oceanic metaphors we could also talk about orienteering in a specific landscape or ground. This was at a time of rupture, or indeed a 'time of monsters' (see Hudson 2019) in which there was a certain sense of both social catastrophe external to the hybrid organisation and an interior crisis: of meaning, mission and futures. Over ten years the organisation, as a multiple, combinatory entity had run a number of arts and music venues and not only had a trusted relationship with partners and networks but also with the audiences that it had built over that decade. In a time of rupture they wanted to understand the artistic, cultural, economic, political, social challenges that they were confronted with and offer a response that maintained their legitimacy and trust with the communities and audiences they had worked with. The organisers of TESTT Space wanted a map of the organisation and site in its state of 'Mess' and 'Messiness' and an outline of the complex networks of play, interaction and experimentation within the material fabric of the building.

One interior crisis was the question of a mission drift but in a context where that mission itself was opaque, fluid or disappearing. This meant that questions of resilience or

sustainability were less about continuing what they had done but understanding what they would be departing from in their complex, hybrid portfolio. This was all in the context of a ground and market of rapidly disappearing, temporary meanwhile spaces that were a central part of the ground of their projects. This very temporariness offered possibilities and also frustrations and particularly in the context of a neo-liberal assault against the very communities and audiences that they were enmeshed in and specifically represented by building development, new shopping precincts and a university which dominates the landscape even if largely in positive form.

The viability of their unique projects and history would be tested by this temporariness but it also allowed them a mobile, temporary camp that could be shifted to other locations which happened during and after the course of the research. This sense of mobility was literally embodied in the human frames of the two main protagonists of Empty Shop rather than in the organisational or physical structures of the project. This capacity for mobility has meant an entirely new iteration of the organisation less rooted in physical structures that would be dispersed by neo-liberal redevelopment and regeneration programmes. The fact that the site was a temporary structure or ‘meanwhile’ space also compelled the researchers to capture the ‘Mess’ of the site while it still existed.

We wanted to understand, through our interviews and ethnography, the specific experiential passage of artists and curators through the space and the ways in which they both built and used TESTT Space. Further, we wanted to test out whether the TESTT Space model was mobile, had more general applicability and significance and what future iterations it might have – bearing in mind that it is a temporary space situated in a unique conflux of networks, tendencies, organisations and material spaces. We saw our research as an archaeology of the site itself: mapping TESTT Space as a temporary formation before it dispersed and dissipated and potentially re-emerged elsewhere in Durham and beyond. It was also the case that the TESTT space could become more materially situated and extended in the site itself but in a different iteration from its original architectural model and we wanted to both examine and facilitate this.

The materiality of a temporary space means that the injunction to document, capture and record it is even more urgent. Part of the archaeology of material spaces is ensuring that,

once passed, maps and photographs remain of a site which has assumed importance in arts practice and in the life of a community. This becomes more urgent as we think of the site as a test-bed for radical practice and the nature of art in our cities and communities. The aesthetics of the space and the documentation of things that have happened there do not just become artefacts of nostalgia but ways of witnessing to the central and social impact of art in our communities and in the development of our ethic as artists. Cultural value is enshrined in that history and site and it needs to be documented in order to ensure the social memory of arts practice as a resource for future generations of artists and historians. Where we have new art produced and new models of curation tested so we have all the more compulsion to document them properly.

## Methodology

As a hybrid, combinatory and multi-purposed organisation Empty Shop and its TESTT Space offered an intervention and a physical *ground* or space for cultural interaction, innovation and experiment in a wider *landscape* largely dominated by big organisations. It attempted to experiment with arts, ideas and its notion of a civic or public whilst building new audiences for art in the widest sense. This ecological framework of activity allowed for a conception of change and transformation and indeed the organisation developed in new directions while the researchers were there. The research was omni-disciplinary and brought into play insights from sociology, anthropology, art history in this site-specific study. It allowed for the documentation of interactions and aspirations and tried to describe the lived phenomenological experience of being in this experimental space.

Ethnographic research into spaces, and specifically the lived experience of spaces of experimentation, has often focused on the material and physical affordances of the buildings (Lewis, Hudson and Painter 2017, 2018). Equally some ethnographic work has focused on an arts practice in a wider landscape and the creative cluster in its wider ecologies (Hudson 2015, Van Heur 2009). One of the central aspects of the experimental organisation and its spaces was its hybrid form as an entity (Battilana and Lee 2014) comprising, as it did, of a combination of studios, consultancy, gallery, music venue and

cultural entrepreneurship. It is an organisation dedicated to 'doing' and to a distinct kind of experimental practice. As Chris Frayling has noted: 'Doing is designing for these people – not systematic hypotheses, or structures of thought or orderly procedures; but potting-shed hit-and-miss, sorry I blew the roof off but you know how it is darling, *craft-work*', (1993/1994: 2). We considered our work to be a kind of 'Messy ethnography' (Lewis, Hudson and Painter 2018) thinking of the research as embedded, intimate research and committed to social change. Our research was an act of both listening and informing. It was a work of co-production – working with studio-holders, curators, artists and facilitators using a range of triangulated qualitative research methods. These included structured interviews, auto-ethnography, ethnography of spaces, arts-led research, art as research, research as art and as 'craft-work'. The question of the 'messy' is apposite in the context of messy spaces of experimentation. Previous messy-ethnographic research has focused on embeddedness in untidy spaces (Law 2004, 2007, 2009, Lewis and Russell 2011) whilst we were also interested in messy relationships of co-production (Cotterill et al 2016, Hudson, Cotterill and Webster 2015) and in the lived experience of the researcher as they encounter various translations and iterations of themselves in the research process (Crawshaw, Rowe and Hudson 2015).

In this research we assumed a 'messy ethnography': an experimental, intimate and embedded approach which we think complements the experimentation within arts spaces, galleries and studios. In practical terms this meant a series of semi-structured interviews which we thought of as expansive and conversational, a series of short surveys, and an embedded experience of the spaces and studios as habitats and sites of experimental arts practice. The ethnographic framework of this research developed as part of wider studies of social formations by the authors which tried to combine large-scale social processes with intimate case studies. This has been a distinctive ethnographic project which has often tried to provide a historical ethnography of objects, machines, social beings broadly situated within a phenomenological approach informed by critical theory (Hudson 2015, 2016, 2017a, 2017b, 2018, 2019; Donkin 2016, 2017). Central to that ethnographic project is the idea of the experimental space as something which can be observed in its use by social beings. The historical ethnography of the slave ship, for example, can address the physical space of the artefact, how it is used, its status as mobile object and total institution and its



impact on the genesis of new social formations. The ethnographic focus on historical artefacts is often an exercise in imagination (see Comaroff and Comaroff 1992). The focus on contemporary spaces and interactions witnessed by the ethnographic observer is no less an exercise in understanding the kinds of imaginaries that shape the use of spaces. The 'Mess' of the space focuses the ethnographic observer towards the nature of the space as experimental site but also allows the method itself to be 'Messy' by trying to understand the logics, interactions and mobilities within the site and map them.

The ethnographic observers were brought into the TESTT space as a result of a set of conversations of some duration on the part of one of them. The other was then invited, as a specialist observer of arts organisations, galleries and historical artefacts to bring their 'sight' into the site of 'Mess'. This was largely because of a previous piece of research with another experimental arts project (Lewis, Hudson and Painter 2017, 2018). The observers were invited to study the site over the course of a year and worked with a number of respondents, observed the spaces and conducted interviews. The ethnographic engagement with the site and the respondents associated with it produced a large qualitative data set in notebooks, recordings and transcripts and was designed to present a holistic ethnographic account of a site and its inhabitants. The research worked with an emergent set of six themes; the significance of the TESTT model, the gaps in provision and markets in Durham City, the engineering of social impacts within the project, the practice of studio-holders within the space, the development of artists and challenges to artists and the project in a time of rupture. These themes emerged in our initial conversations with Empty Shop and in the research process. As part of the process we interviewed 11 studio-holders, the 2 founders of TESTT Space, a student and co-researcher who organised the student activity within the space and an intern who was a year 10 student from a local school. We received 5 further questionnaires from studio-holders who could not be interviewed in person and received 2 questionnaires from producers and curators of exhibitions within the gallery. In addition we documented exhibitions and interactions within the space on 6 different occasions specifically related to the themes that emerged.

### **The significance of the distinctive Space and model of TESTT**

The significance of the distinctive Space and model of TESTT lies in the spatial and temporal location of that Space. What we mean by this is that the geographical and cultural/historical location of the site is unique. Geography matters because in terms of contemporary culture Durham is overshadowed by the vibrant scene in nearby Newcastle. Moreover, the city is celebrated as a centre for outstanding medieval culture rather than the contemporary. The history which brought it into being was a series of events, disruptions, conversations, *doings*, which facilitated the entrance of a unique experimental space. It thus provides a model for others hoping to replicate its success and avoid its limitations as well as documenting the arrival, endurance and termination of a test-bed which has had significant social, curatorial and artistic impacts. This notion of *thinking* is important: even in serendipitous, often chaotic and disruptive histories of creativity the capacity to think and to think through is seriously underestimated in arts organisations. TESTT is a thinking practice and a social brain that can inform, entertain, advise, disrupt, experiment and craft new vistas of spatial utopia.

TESTT Space is a space of experimentation: of making art and, in turn, making our community and our social world. There is a multitude of practices within it and beyond it. It is a site of craft, fabrication, testing. It rests upon the unique artistic use of, and making within, studios and new and distinctive curatorial practices. It is a space of play and of interaction and solidarity: of having fun, making friends and artistically building a new social space. It is a space of creativity which for some is about being entrepreneurial and making a living. For others it is a space to pursue a dedicated, committed and autonomous artistic journey albeit in a space of interaction and support. It is a space of exhibition, visitation and making and as a space of play has hosted film, music, social events and social interaction generally. It also has a diversity in its inhabitants as well as in its events. There are artists and makers, placemaking specialists, photographers, film-makers and students who are making and programming. Artistic themes and making in the studios range from reflections

on the deep time of antiquity to new affordances of fabrics to new modellings of light-structures – making which has had international effects and persisting significance (see Ingold 2016).

The artefact of the material space and the interactions that have taken place within, upon, outside it have a value just as much as the artefacts of art as objects. This also means that the building that houses TESTT Space itself acts as an agonistic and antagonistic civic space. The temporary encampment of artists postulates a new civic space, a new vista of utopia which tests out art and models of social and aesthetic forms (some of which are taken forwards, some abandoned). The notion of TESTT as civic space is significant and many of the conversations, interactions and exhibitions would have been impossible without its existence and the material fabric of the building. In many ways this new social world of TESTT was itself built out of detritus: the decaying buildings and infrastructures of a Job Centre and council offices no longer fit for purpose. Indeed the repurposing of material spaces is one of the central rationales of Empty Shop itself and its propulsion of new civic and aesthetic spaces in the city: the many iterations of empty shops.

At the same time TESTT Space as a temporary camp has had some endurance and history in this iteration and also stands geographically in a conflux of universities, organisations and networks. At the heart of this has been the core management and infrastructure of Empty Shop: in the city perhaps both a harmonic and dissonant voice in terms of its own programme of mess and playfulness in art and music, regeneration, community involvement, social justice and civic action. Empty Shop has relational agency and deals with a complex field of relations competently and with a huge amount of trust and respect invested in them: largely because of their history of work in the ‘field’. This has meant in many ways the organic development from below of social, artistic, musical programmes within the city but a programme which is in alliance with the organic spatial development of premises, venues and locations of artistic and musical production. They are a definitive model for co-production with multiple agencies: co-working and co-creating at a micro and at a macro level. This has meant the building of coalitions (at once revolving, dispersing, persisting) with local authorities, voluntary sector organisations, universities, trade unions, community members, artists, academics and it has also ensured the permeability of the TESTT Space: that it does not simply exist as a building but also as a mobile concept and

model of access and openness have been central to this and the dispersal or termination of TESTT Space therefore survives the end of its first material iteration. The TESTT Space model is itself permeable.

TESTT has allowed both the retention of artists in the city and the propulsion of artists into the world. It has offered different ways of engaging in the complex lives of artists and curators, allowing them to test aesthetics and try out new social models. It has thought up its own network and as a thinking practice has developed its own politics, civics and imagined a set of new futures. TESTT Space is based on principles of inclusion such as generational exchange, community involvement and interaction and the development of artists from diverse social backgrounds. It is part of the wider DIY infrastructure of the Empty Shop model and is entirely artist-focused. One respondent was surprised and delighted to be asked ‘What do *you* need?’ while viewing the building as a potential studio-holder. It acts as a huge support mechanism for artists and curators and respondents spoke of it in positive terms as a family or friendship network. It has an extremely positive vibe and is very informal at the same time as being dedicated to doing things well.

Beyond the core management team of the 2 founders is a supportive collective of knowledge and experience. The Space is friendly, safe and flexible with an eclectic mix of artists. TESTT’s distinctiveness lies not in the Space/Building/Bricks but in the built community. TESTT is therefore mobile. The community are the foundations of TESTT as a ‘moveable feast’. The collective all love art passionately and TESTT demonstrates art as a viable and visible career. TESTT is a definition of creativity. It’s about doing it and being creative rather than having a plan or product. It has traction because of this – it is a backlash against quantifiability. Exploration and fluidity are part of a process-led approach to cultural regeneration and making as well as building audiences for contemporary art in the city and beyond. Generally there is a tendency in the sector to consider success in terms of growth and longevity, and the ultimate goal of attaining NPO (Arts Council England National Portfolio Organisation) status. Empty Shop champion time-limited projects, instinctively embracing what Nick Malyan calls ‘the emergent cycle’ and see this, in many ways, as their greatest asset (Malyan 2019). This divergence from the dominant growth model in favour of a sequence of temporary projects that allow the right experiences and solutions for the

spaces and the people in them to emerge is what makes Empty Shop, and TESTT Space distinctive as it constitutes an inherently experimental cycle.

### **Gaps in Provision in Durham**

There is a vacuum in Durham City both in terms of the continuous provision of contemporary arts activity and also in terms of cultural regeneration from below. No-one is there to play in this vacuum but Empty Shop and the partnerships it has created and will create through TESTT. There is much contemporary art in the City and many practitioners but they are often de-visibilityed by a lack of networks, exhibition opportunities and social interactions. Many artists work at home and in home studios and this has an impact on art practice as a civic activity.

Gaps lie in the local, affordable studio spaces in the City and the lack of a 'community' of contemporary artists aside from informal friendship networks. There is no art scene and no art schools and there are no spaces for contemporary arts practice and conceptual work. The County Council have supported work and things do happen in schools, and in the University but there is no overall oversight on this and there is a lack of cohesiveness and connection.

There are no formal artists networks and no space, material and metaphorical, for 'creatives' and those audiences that do exist are generally practitioners themselves even when we understand that there is an appetite for contemporary work in the city. Indeed the challenges are multiple: 'officialdom', finance, workloads, available spaces, issues with the local authority and universities, lack of networks and galleries. This 'vacuum' is either a vortex which swallows everything up and in which the 'contemporary' disappears, or a space in which we can enter and operate in. TESTT has offered a space within that vacuum for the emergence of new forms of interaction. The development of a new contemporary arts space with some permanence was a continuing theme of the research, but there were also challenges to this and a reluctance to follow or develop a kind of official route for this leading to professionalisation and institutional stasis. These kinds of models might well have led Empty Shop and TESTT away from their original ethics and vision.

## **Engineering Social Impacts**

Social impacts are incredibly hard to measure at the same time as questions of cultural value are so necessary to address in current funding climates. Examining the 'metrics' of audience-building and measurable impacts, on confidence and mental health for example, also entail the development of rigorous new systems and scales of measurement. We often think of this in terms of numerical/quantitative measured outputs and softer, qualitative data on outcomes for individuals and communities that are measured differently. The research addressed this by exploring how the artists thought about the multiple impacts of their work.

There are many 'like-minded spirits' in the region: The Steam Machine Brew Tap, Pop Records, New Writing North and the LGBT Queerpunk community, for example. Partnerships have also been built with Durham County Council, Durham University Library and Collections/Durham University, County Durham Cultural Partnership, schools (Durham 6<sup>th</sup> Form), and colleges (New College). There has been a set of residencies. TESTT Space is now a cog in the cultural life of Durham in terms of contemporary art (in the midst of the biennial Lumiere festival and occasional contemporary art shows at Ushaw College, the Gala Theatre gallery and Durham University) and this is due to the longevity and legacy of Empty Shop in the city. It is a distinct cog and it is already embedded and has momentum. Empty Shop are well-connected but the 'art world' is just beginning to recognise them as significant agents in a complex field. The external relations of TESTT can be explored in three ways. Firstly, in the relation of TESTT to outside communities of practice and the art and culture that TESTT facilitates in the city and beyond. Secondly, in their horizontal relations to like-minded projects and partners that they are in alliance and coalition with and with mutual peer support. Thirdly, in TESTT's relation to major cultural agents in the region, infrastructure organisations and regional governance authorities. Many of these relations are in the private, public and governmental sector and with semi-autonomous agencies like Creative Factory.

## **Studio-holders: Practice and Purpose**

TESST Space demonstrates eclecticism and diversity in its exhibitions and arts practice. Its residents are industrious and make things happen in the city. Artists and curators use the Space to make, think and experiment. It is a Space where experimentation and 'faffing' (noted by one respondent as important) is allowed. The artists are working, exhibiting, applying to and winning regional and national competitions and selling. There is a lot of prestige present here and talent with many esteem indicators. The quality of practice is outstanding and most artists are keen to show their work and particularly in group shows. In terms of social value the work has been shown in hospitals, schools and universities (including a key partnership with Ustinov College, Durham). This all bears witness to the transformation of the old Job Centre as a material space into something distinctive with a significant sense of cultural value and demonstrable impact. The work of one respondent highlights empty spaces of decay and this can stand as an interesting metaphor for the renewal of urban spaces and repurposing them as arts spaces for social change. Making in this space is a 'radical gesture' (as a respondent notes) against the corporate, the official and the banal. One interviewee deliberately associates his work with TESTT Space due to his belief in its cultural value and another believes his membership of TESTT will be decisive for funding – to be part of something bigger than an individual artist. The studios are experimental spaces: creativity is about work, trying things out, taking risks. Creativity is not a given – it is about time and effort. The studios offer freedoms to explore. It is a creative space. Ambition is no good without opportunity and the space, metaphorical and material, to realise that.

### **Artist Development**

Artist development is a central part of the TESTT memory and aspiration. The TESTT peer network is key. We know that friendships and networks are built here for solidarity and the development of practice. This is part of TESTT being a magnet for creatives. Respondents felt that TESTT offered them a sense of a 'white cube' experience in terms of the material Space of the gallery. One respondent talked about this as needing a 'Space where magic happens'. It is a space where thought processes are unrestricted and which facilitates and initiates risk-taking. Being part of a community has positive impacts on practice but it also offers a 'messy' Space of making and exhibition. It is clear that the studios afford bigger, different and more experimental work – and potentially bigger commissions – and this is

more unrestricted than having a studio at home along with its different interactions. As one respondent notes: 'I don't think there are very many... well I don't know whether there are any other organisations that are involved with art work, providing a space where people who are creative can put on their ideas without it needing to be expensive or formal ... Durham and the north east in general lack these sort of spaces'.

### **Challenges in the Space in a time of rupture**

A number of challenges are encountered in the Space. Most of these are due to the material limitations of the physical building: a building which also offers a set of affordances, experiences and possibilities. Artists and curators expressed their aspirations and these are outlined below.

There are significant issues around access. This is both physical and metaphorical. On the one hand there are issues around keys, entry to the building, and mobility to the higher floors which signal problems of inclusion and exclusion. There is no disabled access. On the other hand there is a metaphorical problem of access in that the building is essentially invisible as a material and cultural entity. Its public 'face' is a small label on a buzzer next to a door at ground level but easily missed. In the same sense it is 'outside' an arts circuit and is almost non-existent in terms of visitability outside of public events. This makes it very unlike any other 'public-facing' gallery. We should not underestimate the problems in the materiality of the building itself – and of course this is something that is recognised and part of the history/archive of TESTT.

Challenges also lie in the very useful dissonance and dissensus that TESTT offers to the City and to the cultural region. Its DIY model has accrued significant trust and respect and contaminating this with 'officialdom' and the 'local authority' of government has challenges. The borders between TESTT and other authorities, networks, organisations is permeable and TESTT constantly reaches out to them but to maintain integrity and ensure resistance to banality it needs to retain its sense as an independent camp. This can create tensions.



There are issues and challenges in the use of the Space and the different ways that artists use both studios and gallery – this means overcoming the idea of TESTT as an ‘empty Space’ and making it a more public, challenging, antagonistic civic space: a new ‘demos’ in the City.

There are also significant issues and challenges (and possibilities) in the very temporariness of TESTT Space and worries for the future. Future developments of TESTT Space offer new ways of thinking about what has been achieved at this point and this is enmeshed in the problem of contemporary art in the City and the region. This may mean that the model of TESTT needs to be changed or even abandoned. This is a serious question about the future of arts in the city and working as a DIY co-production set-up in the cultural context and challenges of the region. What is central is that there is a huge amount of trust in the vision and leadership of TESTT Space. The Empty Shop infrastructure has initiated so many possibilities and transformations that the cultural map of the City has itself changed. There is a degree of modesty about this but there is also a sense that there should be a higher profile and reach of TESTT and what it has achieved and continues to achieve – and this offers challenges both to the TESTT model and the future of Empty Shop itself. The distinctiveness and necessity of TESTT Space remains strong and there is a great deal of encouragement to continue and develop.

The challenges are in many ways what makes the Space a playful and experimental Space in which to practice, and future versions of TESTT will come with other challenges. Only by TESTT *thinking* through its futures can we both make sense of that challenging past and be better prepared for the challenges that the future will offer. Hesitating between past, present and future the temporary camp of TESTT offers many lessons for thinking about materiality, networks and the possibilities of experimental practice.

### **Conclusion: Social futures in times of rupture**

Respondents recommended that the Space grow and that the TESTT model achieve greater momentum. There was a sense that, through modesty, the Space and its potential was underplayed. The developing public profile of the Space was necessary. This meant for some an increase in the number of studios and an increased use of the studios by the holders. As

one respondent noted: the 'Space feels a bit empty sometimes'. One noted the 'critical mass' of the TESTT Space and model and indicated ways in which it could be built upon.

There was a sense that the strength of TESTT was its fluidity and its nature as a multi-purpose Space including gallery and studio spaces. This fluidity needed to be maintained but there was further scope for an artist's library and potentially an archive space which acted as the enduring memory of the TESTT model (this could also be web-based). There was a notion of rethinking the communal spaces and having a prominent, dedicated place of interaction for conversation and collaboration. These spaces often emerge organically but there is reason to think more about this.

Artists wanted a 'show' in the space at all times: a persisting and rolling curatorial model. This presents issues around the 'fourth wall' of the building because for all intents and purposes the gallery/studios are invisible except at exhibition openings. This means a programme of invigilation and rethinking and revisioning the issue of visibility of TESTT from the perspective of the street and the community. The restriction of visibility and visitation is a major problem in this iteration of TESTT.

The artists have been profiled well but this could be increased both online and in physical presence. This could develop from a new volunteer-led programme of open studios and events and thinking about the use of TESTT as a civic space of interaction, exhibition and visitation: breaking the 'fourth wall' of the gallery. This might be aided by new versions of social media and a mail list and there are good models of this in our sector. Reaching people physically and technologically builds audiences, but it also builds coalitions and co-productions between TESTT and other individuals and organisations.

There was a will to develop a more workshop-based model of programming within the fabric of the building. This might include internal workshops for artists (for example skill sharing on funding, how to do applications, exhibition proposals, talk about practice) or initiating workshops with the community and specific partners. We should aim to bring people into the Dark room and 'making' workshops. This might include forging clearer and more sustained links with regional artist networks and thinking about different models for organisational development. It also entails rethinking where you are in the physical and

cultural geography of the region (including Sunderland as one artist noted). Also noted is the potential, in terms of arts education, to continue to inform practice with strong links to schools and colleges such as Durham 6<sup>th</sup> form who offer a large and diverse arts curriculum.

There is a huge amount of support for Empty Shop and the TESTT model. One respondent said that there is a need and a want for a strong regional propulsion of TESTT – TESTT ‘has form’ they said. At the same time the fluidity of the DIY model is one of the best things about the project and the wider organisation and the integrity of this must be protected.

The gallery and studio spaces continue to evolve and some gallery spaces have now been turned into more accessible studios. The Empty Shop HQ finally closed in December 2018 and much work was then refocused on TESTT Space itself as a site of cultural governance and regeneration. Empty Shop will also be involved in thinking about the wider applicability of their model throughout the region in consultancy and a much more mobile notion of TESTT and its legacy and archive.

The generous and extended description and documentation that we have offered above illustrates not just the power of experimental, complex and hybrid arts organisations, but also that the kinds of omni-disciplinary methods of messy ethnography that we use have wide applicability in understanding arts and its markets in times of rupture. The lived experience of the artists and curators who endured the space was paralleled by the lived experience of the researchers who were part of the fabric of the projects and within the physical fabric of the building for a year. These methodologies offer ways of thinking about social change and also new thinking about interior, translational change for the researchers themselves as they encounter and describe these formations.

Outside of the specific empirical findings we think there is a significance to the TESTT project and research process to other cultural organisations. The TESTT research was part of a wider set of research projects initiated by the authors which were both historical and contemporary. These research projects have looked at gallery spaces and sculpture, historic artefacts, refugee arts and music and contemporary studio and arts practice. What has guided these research processes was an idea that experimental moments and spaces, as in the slave ship and the factories of industrial capitalism (see Hudson 2019), can be decisive

for the nature and the trajectory not just of individual human lives but of markets for products and services and of entire civilisations and social formations. In contemporary societies cultural organisations face a set of problems and crises specifically around the kinds of themes we identified in one organisation. These are often crises around mission and intention, in gaps in provision and the task of filling those 'market' gaps, the nature of social impacts and how we can engineer them, the actual practice and economic and aesthetic development of artists and then how we operate, often as 'Messy' organisations in disruptive times. The question of the temporary site is central to this being at once durational and rooted in a specific space and one which may disappear. This question of disappearance of the temporary site provides research with an injunction to document and record and make data available for future research or those who did not ethnographically describe the site in existence. The rapid redevelopment and regeneration of towns and cities makes the 'meanwhile' space a central site of importance in terms of artwashing sites before gentrification but also because it is so fleeting that experimental activities are decisive to its being even when they are about to dissipate.

Future research has to describe and then move on to theorise the role of these temporary spaces precisely because their experimentation and temporal being become so critical for what follows in those spaces, in art's markets and in the development of social formations. Future research has to uncover and delineate three fundamental processes. Firstly, it has to archaeologically document and map what went on in those spaces and in doing so move on from description into a theorisation of why experiment and the temporary are so linked. Secondly, research has to bring into relation microscopic, embedded and intimate descriptions of actual, if fleeting, spaces with wider, vaster, macroscopic social processes and create a new ethnographic and sociological imagination of both the concrete interaction in space (and the concrete fabric also) with more abstract, durational historical processes. Thirdly, research has to further refine the question and the practice of ethnographic observation and find new ways of de-privileging the voice of the observer in order to more accurately express the insights, words and movements of those who traverse and use the temporary space. These suggestions for future research then move from the descriptive into a new analytical terrain that is both microscopic and macroscopic not just in

terms of the research but in terms of the political implications of concrete doing and 'Mess' and its wider historical effects and consequences.



Fig. 1. TESTT Space social media post. Photo courtesy of Carlo Viglianisi



Fig. 2 Exhibition at TESTT Space, *Dynamics of Dialogue* by Francis:Kirkbride (July – August 2018). British - American duo Greg Kirkbride and Sam Francis Bennett met at the 'Scuola Internazionale di Grafica Venezia,' Venice, Italy in the summer of 2016 as part of a residency program. After a year of further discussion about their work, they decided to begin their first international collaboration in New York in 2017. In the summer of 2018 they worked at TESTT Space on a second collaboration culminating in an exhibition. Their primary objective for collaboration is to investigate the relationship between painting and printmaking. <https://www.franciskirkbride.com/volume-ii>

Photo courtesy of Sam Francis Bennett.

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